

High School Dropouts

High school dropouts are three times as likely to slip into poverty as those who finish high school; they make up nearly half of the heads of households receiving public assistance. Between 1973-1997, the average hourly wage for high school dropouts decreased 31% when adjusted for inflation. Economic prospects for dropouts will even be even gloomier as more jobs require advanced skills and technical knowledge.

High school dropouts are at risk for other negative outcomes like becoming a teen parent or spending time in prison. The children of dropouts are much less likely to graduate themselves, perpetuating a cycle of diminished opportunities. One-third of children whose parents did not complete high school must repeat a grade. They also require special services and are suspended or expelled more frequently.

Youth may be tempted to drop out of school if they live in communities where a large number of service jobs are available. Unfortunately, most of these are low-paying jobs with few opportunities for advancement. The immediate economic return will be offset by a decrease in future earnings.

Not all youth drop out of school and become employed. In Missouri, 6% of teens are not in school and not working. These youth are often called “idle” or “disconnected” teens. These teens are “disconnected from the roles and relationships that set most young people on pathways toward productive adult lives. Disconnected young women are more likely to rely on public assistance, while disconnected young men are more likely to spend time in jail. Idle youth may be or are more likely to become homeless, compounding their disadvantage.

These youth may have been disconnected long before high school. Children who move four or more times during their childhood are more likely to drop out than less mobile children. Missouri defines “high mobility” as more than 25% of students transferring in or out during the school year. In 2001, the state average for student mobility was 28.1%. Only one in twenty school districts experienced high mobility in 1988. By 1997 one in four schools reported this level of transfers. Higher mobility rates were more likely in districts with higher rates of child poverty.

Another aspect of this disconnection is apparent in a recent study of drop out prevention programs. Dropping out of school is easy. Students who have done it say they simply stopped going to school one day. Some said they dropped out because they thought school principals or teachers wanted them to. Others said they dropped out because of circumstances beyond their control. Either way, they may have encountered little resistance from others around them. To remain in school, youth must have access to caring adult models, responsive schools and supportive communities.

In Missouri, the dropout rate increased between the 1992 and 1994 school years but has declined since then, with a slight upturn in 2000. There were 11,071 dropouts in the 2000/01 school year. Another important measure of school achievement is the graduation rate, or the percentage of ninth graders who complete high school four years later. In 2001, four-fifths (83.2%) of students graduated with their peers. The graduation rate increased between the 1997 and 2001 school years.

Source: Kids Count in Missouri 2002

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The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education estimates that approximately half of the students who drop out of school eventually achieve their G.E.D. certificates.

County Findings

Less than 2% of enrolled students dropped out of school in Ripley, Shelby, Chariton, Douglas, DeKalb, Shannon, Livingston, Clark, Gasconade and Andrew Counties in 2001. In 2001, in Grundy and Stoddard counties and in St. Louis City, 8% or more students dropped out of school.

Children with Disabilities

Dropout rates are substantially higher for children with disabilities. In 2001, the dropout rate for children receiving special education services was nearly twice as high (7.57%) as the overall rate (4.3%). Graduation rates for these children were also substantially lower than for all other children.

Racial Data

The dropout rate was 6.2% for minority students and 3.8% for white students.

Preventive Factors

Ways to improve high school dropout rates include:

- Adequate preschool and early education programs that help prepare students to learn;
- Greater attention to literacy in general with an emphasis on early literacy;
- Early identification and monitoring of students who may be at-risk for learning and development problems;
- Instructional practices and curricula that are tailored to the individual needs of each student;
- Identification of those students who may be experiencing personal and family problems, and providing them with onsite health and social services;
- Services to children with disabilities, especially children with behavior disorders;
- Teachers who are able to identify and address cultural differences to reduce the high dropout rates of minority students;
- Programs that combine education with real life, hands-on learning and involve students in the community by providing after school activities, mentoring programs, and community service projects;
- Varied learning opportunities, like summer school, vocational-technical education and new technologies that meet diverse needs;
- Strong school infrastructure through performance standards, regular assessment and professional development of teachers;
- High school completion option for teens involved with the juvenile justice system;
- Supportive services to teen parents such as child care and mentoring;
- Business involvement through partnerships that encourage school attendance;
- Appropriate Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) that include positive behavior plans;
- Programs that facilitate parental involvement in schools.